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## PROJECTS IN LITERATURE

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As a preface to a concrete treatment of the project method in the study of literature, I can bring forward no more appropriate generalization than the oft-repeated one that literature is an interpretation of life. There *is* nothing of more significance for the success of the method. We grant this truth, and it follows that your project and my project, every day of our lives, is to make the literature that we teach a living thing. If the purpose of all education is what we claim, a preparation for right living, we must admit that we have in the field of literature the easiest and most appropriate material to present. The books that the pupils read are their short-cuts to an experience in worthy living.

But this necessitates not only that the books live before their eyes, be not merely a picturesque panorama of somebody else's life in some other day and generation, but also that a vital connection must be established between then and now. The term literature demands that a work be based on permanent truths, the ideals and emotions of the human heart, and not on the changing aspects of material life at a given time. The pupil must then be made to see that this piece of literature is his textbook in the study of life as it is now, and that the laws that really govern Macbeth's life, for instance, are the same as those that govern William Smith's. His project is to find where that other printed life touches his, how human motives, laws, and relations repeat themselves from generation to generation. Literature is his short-cut to experience—he lives and learns by proxy.

A project as I am using the term, is a purposeful unit of work, carried on in social surroundings.<sup>1</sup> Confusion arises from the fact

<sup>1</sup> See W. H. Kilpatrick, *The Project Method*, published by the Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City. 25 cents.

that so many seem to think the project method always demands something concrete, objective, tangible, as its result. That could hardly be, of course. Our result in literature, however, may be something much finer, a new set of thoughts and feelings, a new focus on what seemed an ugly world.

There are two types of projects developed in the study of the classics: (1) enjoyment of an experience and (2) the solution of an intellectual difficulty, or what is often called the problem project. I should like to take these up first as they apply to daily class work, and then as we may use them where they cover a long period of time or run through a whole book.

The serious trouble with assignments in literature, especially among young and inexperienced teachers, of whom we have many, and lazy teachers, of whom we have a few, is the so-many-pages or so-many-chapters method, without any real objective. A lesson has to have an excuse for its existence. "Take so many pages for tomorrow," isn't going to give a child an interest in tomorrow's assignment. Were we dumbly satisfied to eat one slice of bread or one spoonful of sugar a meal during the war? Was it ours not to reason why? Studying a lesson because we teachers say so is not a democratic enough procedure for the new generation. If one has a reason for the so-many pages, one must share it with the pupils.

At the risk of seeming to be all introduction and no body, all theory and no practice, I must add one thing more before I turn to the concrete side. As a matter of fact if the theory of this is injected into the veins, the practice is childishly simple. There can be no success in project work unless it is unfailingly accompanied by socialized classroom procedure. I do not mean by this a formal chairman-secretary organization, with the teacher's finger forever on his own lips. That has its merits at times, but not in a class studying literature. I mean a socialized spirit, an honest desire of the pupils to talk. A teacher of literature should forever drop the "I—and you" spirit in teaching and leave only the "we." She should run the class as she would a meeting in her own home; drawing out the weak, complimenting the timid, and firmly suppressing the overzealous.

Suppose we take now as a concrete example for detailed explanation Shakespeare's *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, usually given in the Freshman year in high schools. This is really suited to one type of project, the enjoyment of an experience. Its refreshing indifference to literary law and order prevents our using it for the study of technique, even if we so desired. One should begin with the frank announcement to the pupils that we sometimes read books in school for enjoyment, just for fun. They often look doubtful, poor children! They will probably enjoy this, one may continue, because the spirit of mischief is one of the characters. Have they ever read of a boy who embodied the spirit of mischief? Tom Sawyer, of course! Add to this the fact that the play deals with the absurd side of being in love—have they ever had any brothers or sisters very much in love? Do they like the greenwoods and the stories of the little people in it? Well, then their project is to go ahead and have a good time with the play.

With some such questions and suggestions as the following, one may throw into their hands most of the actual carrying out of the project: Would they like to act out this play, read most of it aloud? Which boys read well in grammar school? Which ones acted in plays there? Which pupils are best suited to the various types? What kind of scenery should we daily paint with the mind's eye if we want to appreciate the play? It would be pleasant to have a couple of boys each day to paint the scenery in words, act as verbal scene painters for us. How much should they prepare for a day's lesson? As far as possible let them plan their own daily assignments.

Then after the first day: Why ought they try to understand the meaning of every line, to use the notes and the glossary? Will they try to help each other by volunteering to read a line with the proper inflection when necessary? Had we better put in some occasional gestures? How do they help? You will take the part of one of the women, if they like. Which one do they think you had better take; which is the best suited to your type?

If one considers a play or movie that appeals only because of its fun, what is the means the author has used to make it funny?

Tangling the play up, of course. What had they best watch for, then, every day? How many sets of characters and threads of plot are there? Why did Shakespeare use three rather than two? Which set can make the worst tangles? Shall we cut any of this play, as real actors do? They had better watch for and mark the lovely and the clever speeches as they go along and then when the play is finished, they can all assist in selecting the quotations for the class to learn.

In some such simple fashion, the pupil goes through the various steps of the project, recognition of a purpose, planning and executing it, and the passing of a mild form of judgment. It may seem to some that the project here illustrated verges on another type, the embodiment of an idea in external form. It would, were it not for the extreme informality of the procedure, and the calm recognition of the fact that we are doing this work only to amuse ourselves as a group. However much they may learn, one thing is certain: they appreciate the play.

The study of the old ballads, by the way, makes a pleasant enjoyment project for Freshman pupils. Reconstruct for them the ancient village green of the Anglo-Saxons or their old banquet-halls on winter nights; add that these people were the children of our present civilization, and therefore really about their own intellectual age. Show them how the metrical feet in these ballads may be turned into half and quarter notes for singing. They will enjoy transposing the feet into musical bars, and the spirit with which they later read the words is most vigorous and spontaneous.

I should like to speak briefly of a few problem projects of the group rather than the individual type, which run through a whole book and cover some period of time. While *Idylls of the King* is perhaps best suited to an aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment project, or to minor problem projects, a very interesting study may sometimes be made of this question: Do the war-ideals of a knight of the age of chivalry differ appreciably from those of the present-day soldier? Most of our supplementary book lists have recently been increased by such additions as Hankey's *Student-at-Arms*, Hay's *First Hundred Thousand*, *Private Peat*, etc. While the boys are reading such books outside, they are often keenly interested in

seeing how little the soldier's notion of duty and honor has changed in all the passing centuries.

In this connection the reading aloud of some of the beautiful and idealistic war poetry of our own time fits in appropriately with the study of the "Passing of Arthur." The pupils will probably themselves suggest "In Flanders Fields" to you, as well as Seeger's "Rendezvous with Death," or Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier," for they express much the same philosophy as that of the dying Arthur.

The *Tale of Two Cities* is excellent for individual problems involving the study of character, but the war angle may also be applied here in a class problem. For a class who happen to be taking current history at the same time, or who are using the *Literary Digest* in class for oral composition, a comparison of the French and the Russian revolutions will immediately suggest itself. If the class contains a large percentage of foreign-born pupils, the project is likely to be worked out in very detailed fashion.

But the finest textbook in life itself that the average high school offers is *Hamlet*. There is no more valuable training in judgment of character and discrimination in choosing one's associates to be had, for after three hundred years it remains quite as modern as 1919. The contention of some teachers who declare that *Hamlet* is too difficult for Juniors in high school, and who proceed to substitute therefor Milton's *Minor Poems*, seems very absurd. Any pupil can find himself or a "piece of himself" somewhere in *Hamlet*, but only those in Milton's own grave likeness can find themselves in Milton. Even they run a chance of getting lost in a tangle of beautiful phrases.

I like to tell my pupils at the start that through this book they may get two or three years ahead of the game in learning to understand people, all in five or six weeks. We start with Horatio in the first few scenes. What sort of man do they think he is going to be? Have they ever met anyone like him? Can they make out the King's heart from those long speeches of his? Have they any aged relatives or acquaintances like Polonius? How would they feel toward their mother if they were put in *Hamlet's* place? Have they any school acquaintances like Rosenkrantz

and Guildenstern? And so on through the infinite possibilities of the study of Shakespeare's characters. Quite early in the book we plan to locate as many of these characters in real life as we can, and to write a detailed character sketch of the most striking likeness, such as "My Grandad Polonius," or "My Brother's Fiancée Ophelia." With lovable boyish optimism, they all lay claim to a friend like Horatio.

The project in literature at its best, I suppose, would be the strictly individual problem worked out in a class group. That of course implies small classes, and time enough for the teacher to recognize individual need. One ought to try hard not to be too severe with apparently irrelevant questioning; we should have a definite enough knowledge of our pupils as individuals, and a keen enough discrimination as to motive, to know an earnest question when we hear one. For these irrelevant questions may be genuine, simon-pure pupils' projects and we may have knocking at our gates the very spirit of keen interest that we want to let in. I am far from suggesting one round of lively gaiety for the pupil; education is a part of life, and you and I know that we all undergo later many gray and leaden days of spiritual drill. But life is not the dull and arid waste that some schoolrooms seem to indicate. May the project, coming into its own, make these deserts to blossom like the rose.